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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S WORK ON AKDAMAR ISLAND ARMENIAN HERITAGE SITE
PROGRESSING WELL

REF: A) ADANA 110 B) REID/GODFREY SEP. 16 E-MAIL

1.(SBU) Summary: AMCON ADANA conoffs and RSO Ankara visited the Armenian Akdamar Island monastery heritage site on 9/28, finding restoration work well underway. The work site seemed well-organized and the project manager conducted a tour of the closed work site. Initial site structural work largely was completed and there was ongoing preservation work on the monastery's interior frescoes. The site manager said that his team included Armenian art history and architectural consultants with whom his team was in regular contact. End Summary.

2. (SBU) In a 9/28 visit to the Akdamar Island monastery heritage site on the southern coast of Lake Van, AMCON ADANA conoffs and RSO Ankara encountered a reassuring level of careful engineering professionalism and deliberate ongoing art history preservation work. The Ankara-based Kartal Kaya-Ebru engineering firm is leading the site team and its manager warmly welcomed our visit. The manager, a veteran of the company's Mostar Bridge restoration project, conducted a tour of the normally closed work site, taking pains to show where the company was expending additional effort to observe the heritage value of the site.

3.(SBU) Noting that the team had worked earlier in the summer to restore the roofs of several otherwise open watersheds in the main annex and an adjacent chapel, the effort now had shifted to interior preservation and structural work. He noted that the company had located the original quarry for stone for the roofs and had used an architectural mortar imported from France (Note: one assistant later said that it had come from Italy. End Note.) to best replicate a more modern bonding material more closely connected to the original mortar bond's composition.

4.(SBU) AMCON Adana conoffs observed that the earlier roof had been stone with additional soil-covering and the site manager concurred that that was how the leaking roof was built when the team arrived (ref. A). He said, however, that the team's Armenian consultants did not know how to reproduce this type of roof with available materials so that it would shed water. That is why the stone roof had been used to restore the building's watertight integrity.

5.(SBU) He also showed where polymer were being injected into exposed decaying interior and exterior stone joints, often supporting overlaid plaster, some of which supported fresco images, sculpted images or paintings. Furthermore he said that those same materials had been used to restore most of the floor to level, finished stone walking level. He pointed out where, in removing floor rubble, the team had located and left open for further archeological examination, a possible baptismal font or shallow well. He also showed where a capstone found in the floor rubble had been reinserted in a corresponding nearby wall area to restore watertight integrity and a seal for a likely wall crypt and said it, too, had been marked for further archeological examination.

6.(SBU) A four-person team was working to preserve the remaining, damaged interior frescoes and painting higher up in the conical dome of the main chapel structure. The lower the level of the frescoes the more work was being done to remove many hundreds of years of incense and wax residue to show the original fresco pigments. Higher up the team showed us that much less damage had taken place than below during past eras of Armenian art disfiguration in eastern Turkey. The team leader said that no chemical washes were being used on the frescoes and they were all being laboriously hand cleaned. They anticipated that their four-person team would be augmented by more experts as weather improved in Spring 2006.

7.(SBU) Looking ahead the team said that it was awaiting the following decisions: 1) whether to extend the timeline for the monastery site restoration (Note: the manager said that the original timeline plainly was too short and ongoing work was not going to be rushed. End Note.) ; 2) whether to seal the site with new windows, for which appropriate designs have been located, and attempt to control its humidity or leave it open; and 3) whether to also start work on preservation of an adjacent 150-200 year old monastery refectory and lodging outbuilding .

8.(SBU) The site manager said that several German, Italian and

Armenian "professors and art historians" had visited the site over the past several months " and given us great reviews" (ref. B). The team filmed the AMCON Adana visit, including the PO noting the confidence-building nature of the ongoing work and his encouraging the team to remain mindful of the site's heritage value.